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The Intellectual Elite of the Christian Right: The Political Theory of the “Reconstructionist” Movement

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1. Introduction

The so-called Religious (or Christian) Right is not a theologically or intellectually monolithic movement. This is evidenced by the existence of a relatively small but very influential “movement” which sometimes aligns itself with the more traditional Religious Conservatives and sometimes seeks a radical independence from (but always influence of) Christian conservatives. The members of this group are most often called “Reconstructionists.” This paper is not designed to detail Reconstructionist philosophical influence on the Christian Right although such influence is a fruitful area for future research.¹ The purpose is to explain who the Reconstructionists are and to show by their own words what their political agenda really is.

2. The Reconstructionist “Movement”²

Reconstructionists constitute a relatively small group of conservative Presbyterian Calvinists who believe that the Bible is the foundation of all human knowledge.³ Some theological discussion is essential at this juncture.

Reconstructionists trace their systematic Calvinistic theology back to the Reformation and the writings of John Calvin.

Calvin systematized certain theological doctrines which later galvanized in Presbyterianism. Among the more important doctrines was the sovereignty of God (including His continuing and pervasive rule in all human affairs), salvation by the grace of God alone (creating two basic “classes” of people—regenerate and unregenerate), “sola scriptura” (the Bible as the sole authority in all affairs), predestination, covenant theology (more on this later), the importance of God’s “moral” law even in civil governmental affairs, and the total depravity of human nature.⁴

These doctrines have been refined by later Calvinist theologians, with important implications now forming the foundation of Reconstructionist political philosophy. Some of these key theological concepts are listed below:

- (1) Presuppositionalism—a doctrine related both to epistemology and to metaphysics. The idea is that the special written revelation of God as contained in the inerrant, inspired, infallible Bible is the sole and complete authority for judging all human actions. Certain doctrines contained in the Bible and the truth of the Bible itself must be presupposed from the Bible. Written Scriptures are the highest judge of all human affairs. Presuppositionalism assumes that there is no religious or philosophical neutrality.⁵

(2) Covenantalism—the idea that individuals and groups make an agreement with God to obey certain stipulations related to certain kinds of relationships. The “covenant institutions” recognized by the Reconstructionists are the family, the Church, and Civil Government. All other relationships or associations are extensions or variations of these basic covenant institutions.⁶

(3) Theonomism—the idea that the source of all human laws (rules) should be Biblical law. This is equally true for socio-political law (“public law”) and Biblical law is revealed most fully in the Old Testament law of Moses (although the current applications of some so-called “ceremonial laws” have clearly been altered⁷). There is a divergence of opinion among Reconstructionists as to the precise continuities and discontinuities of the Mosaic law as well as to the precise applications of still-valid laws. For reconstructionists, in the political realm, the Bible itself would become the source for general legal principles and penology. Constitutional law, Statutory law and the common law would continue (in the U.S. e.g.) but should conform in principal content to Biblical law.

(4) Postmillennialism—the idea that the rule of God on earth was established in the time immediately after the earthly life of Christ and that this rule will be progressively extended over time to encompass the whole world through the ethical actions of the Church and of individual Christians, as Christianity spreads by Holy Spirit-directed evangelism (not by coercion).⁸

Presuppositionalism is best seen as a foundation for the other three doctrines with the remaining three giving rise to unique political and governmental ideas. These more explicitly political (and economic) implications of the preceding theological doctrines will be set forth below.⁹

3. Convenatalism and the Structure of Civil Government

Covenant theology as understood by Reconstructionists teaches that God rules on earth as individuals, within “traditional” nuclear family units, within churches, and within civil governments place themselves under the authority of God, agreeing to obey God. In terms of civil government this means that the lawful representatives of a people in a given jurisdiction have an obligation to base decisions on God’s law. This concept is intimately related to the idea of multiple jurisdictions. In the words of Dr. Gary North:

No man is solely responsible to any single institution . . . there is no divine right of any earthly institution. Each is under God; none is completely, independent of all the others. This legal pluralism is one of the

sources of western liberty.¹⁰

In other words Reconstructionists see the ideal structure of a society as one being made up of multiple sovereignties: family, church, private institutions as contractual extensions of the foregoing, and civil governments. Within the category of civil government, the key element is "localism" in the context of a "constitutional federal republic." The federal aspect arises since Reconstructionists want the vast majority of things they believe only civil government should do to be done by local government jurisdictions. The republican element arises since Reconstructionists (in the tradition of the framers of the American Constitution) distrust direct democratic processes and believe strongly in "responsible" representative government. Constitutionalism for the Reconstructionists is simply an extension of the idea of covenantalism. Thus Gary North summarizes:

Reconstructionists do indeed want a decentralized republic whose primary charter is the Bible. We would never say that the Bible is the only charter, Calvinists believe in creeds, after all. We believe in other kinds of written documents: covenants, contracts, and charters. Calvinists invented constitutionalism. But all covenants, contracts, and charters, like all creeds, are subject to the ultimate authority of the Bible.¹¹

Again North summarizes the Reconstructionist position:

A social covenant does exist, whether explicit or implicit in human documents of institutions . . . [Methodological covenantalism] sees men as being represented by others before God in various institutional relationships. Men suffer and prosper not only by what they do as individuals, but also by the decisions of those in authority over them . . . men are judged by social orders [i.e., societies are judged by God] in terms of the decisions made by their legitimate covenantal rulers. The Bible teaches the doctrine of representative government. This refers to all governments, not just civil government.¹²

Thus the theological doctrine of covenantalism leads to *jurisdictional* pluralism (including "nation-states" around the world), localism (most civil government functions at the local level), republicanism (representative rather than "democratic" government), "federalism" (concurrent local and *limited* national governments), "constitutionalism" (legal limitations on governmental powers), and numerous "mediating structures" in the so-called private sector (family, church, free market institutions, etc.). It should be mentioned that the Reconstructionists are very strongly in agreement with an "*institutional* separation of church and state."¹³ They have explicitly stated that the Bible demands a "theocracy," not an "ecclesiocracy." (Reconstructionists define a theocracy as simply a nation whose policies are based on Biblical precepts with civil magistrates and clergy functioning in strictly separate capacities.)

4. Theonomism, Public Law, and Public Policy

Theonomism (or Theonomy) is at the heart of the Reconstruc-

tionist view of public policy and public law. Theonomism presumes "that Old Testament standing laws continue to be morally binding in the New Testament [era, and thereafter] unless they are rescinded or modified by further revelation. The civil precepts of the Old Testament (standing judicial laws) are a model of perfect justice of all cultures, even in the punishment of criminals."¹⁴ Most scholars and activists of the "Christian Right" do not hold to this Biblical law position; most hold to some variation of a "dispensationalist" theology, meaning they presume that the Old Testament Biblical law precepts are *not* binding in the New Testament era (meaning all ages after Christ), *especially* not in socio-political affairs unless "repeated" in the New Testament.¹⁵ Thus most on the "Christian Right" hold to some kind of Natural Law/Natural Rights theory. Reconstructionists say the source of all law, including socio-political law (i.e., the laws to be applied by civil magistrates), is the Bible and more specifically the laws of the Old Testament, where not changed explicitly by Christ.¹⁶ Reconstructionists reject Natural law as a source of Public Law, since Scriptures themselves retain an epistemological monopoly and since human nature, including reason and intellect, is totally sinful and therefore incapable of accurately ascertaining autonomously an unwritten version of God's law or applying it consistently.¹⁷ This reliance on Biblical law extends also to the penology associated with the Old Testament law.¹⁸

Thus Reconstructionists hold that there are only two basic types of punishment—restitution (for such crimes as theft) and capital punishment (for murder, rape, adultery, sodomy, and other crimes as defined in the Bible). The failure of Scriptures to delegate to civil government certain other powers combined with certain Biblical law injunctions (e.g., prohibiting theft, bribery, etc.) also tells the Reconstructionists much about economic policy. They strongly support a "capitalist" economic system. This extends for instance to opposition to current American monetary policy and a belief not merely in a "gold standard" but more accurately in a "monetary free market."¹⁹ Reconstructionists do not believe that the civil government has any biblical responsibilities in the context of "welfare" or education. These responsibilities belong exclusively to the family or the church, or to private charitable organizations. The duties that do belong to civil governments (mostly local jurisdictions) are: law enforcement, maintenance of a judicial system, protection of monetary units (currency) punishment of public attacks against Christianity (e.g., public blasphemy, true witchcraft, etc.), quarantine and related health measures, defense of private property rights (and definition where necessary), and the provision of national defense.²⁰ Reconstructionists reject both an interventionist state and a socialist state, seeing either as an attempt by civil government to become as God, the "messianic State".²¹ The natural question is how the Reconstructionists intend to implement a detailed agenda.

5. Postmillennialism and Political Power

Perhaps the most misunderstood aspect of Reconstructionism is the suspicion that a political agenda as radical as the one set forth by Reconstructionists can only be implemented by coercion or by violent revolution. It is true that within Reconstructionism there is an element

of resistance to perceived statist tyranny that is more activist than the Christian Right generally. But it is inaccurate to say that Reconstructionists want revolution or desire to impose a political agenda on an unwilling society.

In reference to revolution and resistance, Reconstructionist thought is summarized best by Gary DeMar:

The Bible shows that resistance to tyranny is legitimate and often commanded . . . God, at least, does not show His disapproval of rebellion against tyrants in [some] specific cases . . . Thus there can be no question of the legality of resistance to evil civil magistrates. But the Bible always specifies that such resistance is not to be autonomous (self-law), but rather based on God's call through another lawful authority, such as a local civil magistrate. This is now unfamiliar doctrine of the Protestant Reformation called the doctrine of interposition. John Calvin articulated it in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. It also is one of the legal justifications for the American Revolution.²²

The Reconstructionists uniformly condemn revolution as lawlessness.²³ But limited, lawful resistance to tyrannical aggressions against church or family is allowed by the Bible. The issue of imposition of a Reconstructionist agenda (by legitimate political means) is quite different than revolution but no less controversial.

The Christian Right is regularly accused of wanting to impose an elitist agenda on an unwilling populace. As we shall see this is not the case; in fact we shall see that in a sense Reconstructionists have a distrust of politics and political solutions. The words of Gary North are instructive on this point:

Just for the record, the authors [Reconstructionists Gary North, Gary DeMar, and Robert Theburn] aren't in favor of imposing some sort of top-down bureaucratic tyranny in the name of Christ. The kingdom of God requires a bottom-up society. The bottom-up Christian society rests ultimately on the doctrine of self-government under God.

The authors are in favor of evangelism and missions leading to a widespread Christian revival, so that the great mass of earth's inhabitants will place themselves under Christ's protection, and voluntarily use His covenantal principles for self-government. Christian reconstruction begins with personal conversion to Christ and self-government under God's principles, then spreads to others through revival, and only later brings comprehensive changes in civil law, when the vast majority of voters voluntarily agree to live under Biblical blueprints [law]. . . .

Christian reconstruction depends on majority rule. Of course, the leaders of the Christian reconstruction movement expect a majority eventually to accept

Christ as savior . . . It isn't possible to ramrod God's blessings from the top down, unless you're God. . . .²⁴

This view of political change is directly related to the prevailing Reconstructionist eschatological doctrine of post-millennialism. Reconstructionists believe that the earthly (as well as heavenly) kingdom of God was initiated in the first century A.D. between the first coming of Christ and the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans (which Reconstructionists view as both a symbol of and the literal alteration of the old covenant relationship with Israel). The earthly manifestations of this kingdom will grow over a long period of time as Christians responsibly obey Biblical law and ethics in all their actions. There will come a time when all the nations of the world will be made up of mostly Christians who are consistently applying Biblical principles. There will be a progress of Christianity (and greater doctrinal consistency and dogma) over time. At the end of this period Christ will return and the world as it is now constituted will end.²⁵ This view diverges significantly from the majority view of the Christian Right on eschatology. The major leaders of the Christian Right have believed that Christianity (at least as a cultural influence growing out of conversions) will be persecuted more and more and in fact will be virtually defeated on earth until Christ physically returns to establish an earthly reign (premillennialism).

In other words Reconstructionist postmillennialists believe things will get better and better over time (with minor setbacks now and then). This will not happen automatically but will involve the providence of God and the obedience of Christians. Politically, the policies of all civil governments will be brought progressively into greater conformity with the law of God as revealed in Scripture, although the results may take literally centuries to be fully and consistently manifested. Reconstructionists distinguish this concept from varieties of utopianism because of the involvement of a providential God, the obedience of God-directed Christians to a *God-revealed* standard, and the disclaimer that there will never be perfection on earth. There will always be sinful individuals but Christianity will prevail generally, with all nations being Christian nations eventually. There will never be a single general-purpose "world government."

It is then somewhat paradoxical that Reconstructionists are very politically active but also disdainful of politics. The doctrine of post-millennialism helps to solve this paradox. Put simply the Reconstructionists have a mandate, they are confident of victory, and they are in no hurry (since it is God's timetable that counts). Thus while they are political activists (in many ways much more so than many "conservative" Christians), Reconstructionists actually argue against grasping at political power prematurely and against solely political solutions to public policy problems and issues. David Chilton writes:

. . . the road to Christian dominion does not lie primarily through political actions. While the political sphere, like every other aspect of life, is a valid and necessary area for Christian activity and eventual dominance, we must shun the perennial temptation to grasp for political power. Dominion in civil govern-

ment cannot be obtained before we have attained maturity in wisdom—the result of generations of Christian self-government . . . one of the distinguishing marks of heretical movements throughout church history has been the attempt to grab the robe of political power before it has been bestowed.²⁶

Rev Gary DeMar writes:

Confusion over Jesus' words develops from a false notion that the answer to man's problems is solely political . . . while there are political implications to Jesus' kingship . . . the kingdom of God cannot be brought about politically. Good laws do not make good people. They can at best prepare people to become good people by restraining outward evil. Only the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration makes people good. [This is the important doctrine of predestination.] The kingdom of God never advances through political intrigue, backed by military power . . . the kingdom of God advances by changing the hearts and minds of those who oppose Jesus Christ and His law. The kingdoms of this world are at war with the kingdom of Jesus Christ and it is the duty of all Christians to be involved in that war until the gates of Hades can no longer stand.²⁷

The point should not be missed however that the Reconstructionists do not believe in some "automatic" or "mystical" cultural and then political change as a result of regeneration. "The state has a God-imposed jurisdiction to perform kingdom activities related to civil affairs according to the specifics of God's Word [i.e., Biblical law, *not* an ethereal "Natural law" or "law of love"].²⁸ Thus Reconstructionists see political and legal change as an outgrowth of cultural and religious/moral change which religious/moral change is in a sense inevitable (i.e., predestined by God) as more people become Christians and apply God's law (Theonomy) in relation to one public policy issue after another (perhaps over a period of centuries). This is the way in which the doctrine of Postmillennialism reconciles the apparent paradox of optimism in politics and distrust and caution in political solutions.

6. Conclusion

We have seen the primary theological doctrines upon which Reconstructionism and its political philosophy are based. We have also seen some of the political agenda of Reconstructionists and have briefly at points contrasted it to the political agenda of the larger "Christian Right." It is clear that in many respects, Reconstructionist political philosophy and implications are more radical than the mainstream of the Christian Right. Yet we have also seen that Reconstructionists are optimistic and non-violent/non-coercive in terms of the achievement of their political goals. In fact they have a certain distrust of political solutions while at the same time expecting a great majority of the people of the world *eventually* to become "Reconstructionist" Christians. There

can be little doubt then that the Reconstructionist movement is a significant development within the larger Christian Right and that it is capable of capturing the Christian (Political) Right. For these reasons it is important to understand the impact which this movement could have on the "Religion and Politics" debate in America.

FOOTNOTES

¹Some Religious Right leaders are sometimes alleged to be "crypto-reconstructionists" (e.g., Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, D. James Kennedy, John Whitehead, and the late Francis Schaeffer). However, there is no recognized leader of the Christian Right today who is a consistent Calvinistic Reconstructionist nor does any conservative Christian leader openly acknowledge any Reconstructionist influence.

²Sometimes the term "movement" is denied; there are several significant organizations (but as yet no major publications or educational institutions), including the Institute for Christian Economics and Geneva Ministries (Tyler, Texas), Chalcedon Foundation (Vallecito, California), American Vision and Council of Chalcedon (Atlanta, Georgia), which are all "think-tanks"; principal figures in the "movement," who may or may not be connected with one of the above organizations, include Dr. Gary North, Dr. Greg Bahnsen, Dr. R. J. Rushdoony, Rev. Gary DeMar, Rev. Joseph Morecraft, David Chilton, Rev. James Jordan, Rev. Robert Thoburn, and Dr. Herbert Schlossberg. It should be noted that not all of the groups or individuals agree with one another on many details.

³Reconstructionist ideas have made some inroads in conservative charismatic churches.

⁴Historically Reconstructionists look with varying degrees of favor on the Constantinian (and some later) Byzantine regime, Charlemagne's Holy Roman Empire, Calvin's Geneva, Cromwell's England, and Puritan America, although Old Testament Israel is considered a better social model (during some periods).

⁵Presuppositionalism has been refined by theologian/philosophers Dr. Cornelius Van Til and Dr. Greg L. Bahnsen.

⁶Convenantalism has been refined by O Palmer Robertson and more recently by Ray Sutton, *That You May Prosper* (Fort Worth, TX: Dominion Press, 1987).

⁷See Greg L. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, 2nd ed., (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1984) and *By This Standard: The Authority of God's Law Today* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1985) for a fuller exposition of the principal of theonomism. Also see Rousas John Rushdoony, *Institutes of Biblical Law* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1973). Dr. Rushdoony is the "patriarch" of the Reconstructionist Movement.

⁸More on this later, but see David Chilton, *Paradise Restored* (Tyler, TX: Reconstruction Press, 1985) and *Days of Vengeance* (Ft. Fort, TX: Dominion Press, 1987), Greg L. Bahnsen, Commentary on the Book of Revelation to be released in 1988; and R. J. Rushdoony, *Thy Kingdom Come* (Fairfax, VA: Thoburn Press, 1970).

⁹A succinct description of key theological conceptions can be found in a Reconstructionist pamphlet by James B. Jordan, "Christian Reconstruction" (Tyler, TX: Geneva Ministries, 1985).

¹⁰Gary North, *Moses and Pharaoh: Dominion Religion Versus Power Religion*, (Tyler, TX: ICE, 1985), p. 206.

¹¹Gary North, "Honest Reporting as Heresy," ICE pamphlet, 1987.

¹²North, *Moses and Pharaoh*, pp. 109-110.

¹³See Bahnsen, *By This Standard*, chapter 27.

¹⁴Bahnsen, *By This Standard*, p. 345; See also Greg L. Bahnsen, "Christ and the Role of Civil Government: A Theonomic Perspective," paper presented at the Consultation of the Biblical Role of Civil Government, Geneva College, June 1987.

¹⁵See Ed Dobson and Ed Hindson, "Apocalypse Now?" *Policy Review* (Oct. 19, 1986); Norman Geisler, "A Premillennial View of Law and Government," *Moody Monthly*, October 1985 for what appears to be the mainstream view of the Christian Right. But see Gary North, "The Intellectual Schizophrenia of the New Christian Right," *Christianity and Civilization* (Tyler, TX: Geneva Press, 1982) for a Reconstructionist critique of this view.

¹⁶Most Reconstructionists agree the Old Testament "ceremonial" rules have been altered significantly in their applications and/or manifestations.

¹⁷Reconstructionists generally hold that individuals can "know" some of God's law but that unregenerate (non-Christian) human nature suppresses that knowledge (although God may still cause them to "do good") and regenerate (Christian) human nature is still flawed from original sin, see Bahnsen, "Christ and the Role of Civil Government" (paper), Endnote 1, p. 36.

¹⁸See Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, Chapter 21.

¹⁹See Gary North, *Honest Money* (Nashville, TN and Ft. Worth, TX: Thomas Nelson Pub. and Dominion Press, 1987); see also generally Gary North, *The Dominion Covenant* (Tyler, TX, ICE, 1982).

²⁰See Gary DeMar, *Ruler of the Nations* (Ft. Worth, TX: Domionion Press, 1987).

²¹See R. J. Rushdoony, *Politics of Guilt and Pity* (Fairfax, VA: Thoburn Press, 1970)

²²DeMar, *Ruler of the Nations*, pp. 104-105; see also Michael Gilstrap, "John Calvin's Theology of Resistance," pp. 189-217 and Tom Rose, "On Reconstruction and the American Republic," pp. 288-310, *Christianity and Civilization*, No. 2 (1983).

²³Reconstructionists also *oppose* non-payment of taxes although they argue that a total tax rate (all levels of government) in excess of 10 percent is immoral. See DeMar, *Ruler of Nations*, pp. 109-111.

²⁴Gary North, Postscript to Biblical Blueprints series (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press, 1987); DeMar's *Ruler of the Nations* and North's *Honest Money* are part of this series.

²⁵This summary is an oversimplification. For a more thorough analysis, see David Chilton, *Paradise Restored* (Tyler, TX: Reconstruction Press, 1985) and Gary North, *Dominion and Common Grace*, (Tyler, TX: ICE, 1987).

²⁶Chilton, *Days of Vengeance*, p. 511; see also James B. Jordan, "Rebellion, Tyranny, and Dominion" in Gary North, ed., *Tactics of Christian Resistance, Christianity and Civilization* No. 3 (Tyler, TX: Geneva Press, 1983).

²⁷DeMar, *Ruler of the Nations*, pp. 119-120.

²⁸Demar, *Ruler of the Nations*, p. 119.